

Spatial Narrative and Experience Expression of Contemporary Art Exhibitions under the Parasitism Concept

Zhengjia Zhao

School of Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, Milan, Italia

Abstract: Based on Michel Serres's philosophy of parasitism and the current development of contemporary art exhibitions, this article explores the deep mechanism of integrating parasitism concepts into exhibition space creation and narrative construction, and analyzes the interdependent and symbiotic relationships between art fields, work carriers, and public spaces, offering practical approaches for contemporary curatorial innovation and public art intervention. The article combines theoretical tracing and empirical analysis, selecting the traditional white cube exhibition mode, Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB), Hong Kong Para Site Art Space, and UCCA Art Project as typical samples, and conducting discussions from five dimensions: theoretical tracing, spatial attachment, institutional intervention, cultural symbiosis, and experiential reshaping. This study finds that the parasitism concept can break the spatial constraints of traditional exhibition models, reconstruct narrative expression logic, and encourage audiences to shift from passive viewing to immersive on-site experiences. This article summarizes the practical value and existing limitations of parasitic narrative, clarifies the balance criteria of art exhibitions in space utilization, narrative construction, and public experience, and opens up a new path for integrating art space into urban life scenes.

Keywords: Parasitism concept; Contemporary art exhibitions; Spatial narrative; Experience expression; Field symbiosis.

1. Introduction

Contemporary art exhibitions have broken away from the traditional mode of displaying works separately and passively coordinating with venues, and now build a complete spatial narrative system based on the relationship between venues. The concept of parasitism originates from biology and mainly describes the survival state of different living organisms coexisting and balancing each other. Through the interpretation and extension of humanistic philosophy, this concept has been introduced into art creation, curatorial planning, and urban public space creation, becoming an important theoretical perspective for studying the transformation of contemporary exhibition spaces.

Michel Serres transcends the biological definition in Parasite and regards parasitism as a common form of interaction in social and cultural systems. Parasitism is not merely a resource occupation, but an intervention of heterogeneous elements that generates new structural and cultural meanings, providing theoretical support for parasitic practices in contemporary art exhibitions.

There have been abundant on-the-ground practices of parasitic thinking in the field of art. Many independent art institutions, urban biennials, and public art museum projects have begun to use parasitic logic to complete exhibition layouts. Para Site Art Space in Hong Kong does not have a fixed exhibition hall and relies on idle urban buildings and public corner spaces to hold exhibitions year-round. It is a typical representative of local parasitic art institutions. The urban parasitic furniture project of the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) and UCCA's Inside Life art project also use parasitic thinking to reconstruct the connection between exhibition space and urban daily life.

Existing research mostly focuses on the parasitic techniques used by artists in their personal creations, with

little exploration of the construction logic of exhibition space narrative and audience experience from a holistic perspective, and a lack of induction and organization of real-world dilemmas [1]. This article relies on verifiable real exhibition cases to analyze the practical role of parasitism concepts in contemporary art exhibition space narrative and experiential expression from five directions: conceptual translation, spatial form, institutional deconstruction, cultural integration, and experiential reshaping, and to sort out their practical characteristics and challenges.

2. Theoretical Origins of Parasitism Concepts and Translation into Artistic Contexts

The concept of parasitism originated in the field of biology, which defines parasitism as a special interdependence between living organisms. One living organism attaches to the surface or body of another living organism to obtain survival resources, forming a pattern of interaction and balance between the two. This relationship is not a one-way resource plundering, but has the characteristics of dynamic evolution and two-way shaping. It has both natural attachment attributes and the potential to reshape existing order, laying a theoretical foundation for applying this concept to art research.

The book Parasite by French scholar Michel Serres breaks through the limitations of biological concepts and expands the logic of parasitism into a theoretical tool for analyzing social structures, cultural systems, and interpersonal order. He pointed out that parasitic elements are widely present within various systems, which can upset the established order, form gaps in cognition and structure, and promote self-improvement and iterative upgrading of the system [2]. Michel Serres divided parasitism into three forms: biological, social, and cultural, which provided an analytical framework

for the field of art to absorb this theory. It also elevated parasitism from a concrete biological relationship to a research perspective that explains the relationship between space, institutions, and culture.

Based on the context of contemporary art, the parasitism concept completes theoretical translation, breaks away from the original biological attributes, and evolves into a curatorial and creative approach that involves spatial intervention, industry reflection, and cultural reconstruction. The parasitism of physical dimensions breaks the fixed display mode of white box exhibition halls, and artworks are arranged based on the architectural structure and idle corners of the city, naturally blending with the surrounding space [3]; institutional parasitism, relying on existing platforms of art museums and institutions, reflecting on the logic of industry power operation through intervention-based creation; The parasitism of cultural dimensions, drawing on traditional patterns, classical forms, and folk art language, completes the reconstruction and innovation of contemporary art on the basis of traditional culture.

At the level of artistic practice, Brazilian artist Enrique Oliveira's creations intuitively present the spatial translation logic of parasitism concepts, simulating the natural growth of vines and extending them along the walls, ceilings, and gaps between doors and windows of the exhibition hall, weakening the boundary between exhibits and space. The series of works exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and the Museum of Contemporary Art in São Paulo all focus on spatial parasitism as the creative core, translating theoretical ideas into real spatial narratives. The artistic translation of parasitism concepts has dissolved the binary opposition between art and space, institutions, and traditional culture, providing a new research direction for narrative innovation in contemporary art exhibition spaces. When it comes to specific exhibitions, the first thing presented is the physical attachment-based parasitism.

3. Physical Attachment-Based Parasitism: Boundary Melting of Exhibition Space and Reconstruction of Narrative Form

Physical Attachment-Based Parasitism is a highly representative practical form in contemporary art exhibitions. Drawing on the logic of parasitic dependence in the biological world, artworks and exhibition layouts are embedded in urban public spaces and existing architectural environments, breaking down the spatial barriers of traditional art museum white box models and reconstructing the physical form and narrative context of exhibitions. This exhibition method does not separate the exhibits from the venue, allowing artworks to organically extend into the architectural space, relying on the spatial carrier to carry the narrative connotation of the exhibition, and merging art and space into one.

Based on curatorial practice, physical Attachment-Based Parasitism can be refined into three forms of implementation. Invasive spatial parasitism relies on the original walls, beams, columns, and other architectural structures of the exhibition hall, embedding artworks into the building texture and reshaping the inherent visual pattern of the site [4]. As a well-established independent art institution in Hong Kong, Para Site Art Space often uses old urban buildings and abandoned industrial factories as exhibition venues without fixed exhibition venues. The works are arranged along the original

layout of the buildings, preserving the historical imprint of the venue and integrating exhibition narratives with the memory of the place.

Corner and crevice parasitism focuses on developing exhibition halls and idle edge spaces in cities, transforming inefficient areas such as staircase corners, building column perimeters, and blind spots in corridors into exhibition narrative carriers. The urban parasitic furniture project of the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) is highly representative, relying on public infrastructure such as urban stairs, guardrails, and columns to create installation works that combine artistic aesthetics and practical value. It transforms scattered urban corner spaces into miniature art fields, achieving an organic connection between exhibitions and daily urban life.

Mobile adaptive parasitism builds an exhibition system with movable and reconfigurable devices, which is not constrained by fixed venue structures and can adapt to different scales and shapes of venues for touring exhibitions [5]. This type of device can be flexibly adjusted and arranged according to the height and spatial span of the exhibition hall, adapting to various venues like living organisms. The audience can walk between the device and the space, completely breaking through the limitations of traditional static exhibition.

Physical Attachment-Based Parasitism has reshaped the spatial utilization logic of contemporary exhibitions, effectively revitalizing idle urban spaces and dissolving the rigid constraints of standardized exhibition halls. This approach also has its shortcomings. Overly transforming the building structure can easily damage the original appearance of the site, and excessive blending of works and space can blur the core expression. In actual curation, it is necessary to control the scale of spatial intervention. The reconstruction of physical space is only the foundation, and the parasitism concept is further extended to the industry institutional level, forming a parasitic practice of institutional intervention.

4. Institutional Intervention-Based Parasitism: Deconstruction and Internal Reflection on the Power Structure of the Exhibition Industry

Institutional Intervention-Based Parasitism is a critical practice paradigm in contemporary art exhibitions. This practice is no longer limited to the attachment of a single physical space. It uses art museums, art institutions, and curatorial industry systems as parasitic carriers, and embeds industry operation systems and power structures through project entry, resource sharing, and rule intervention, rethinking and reshaping industry norms. The exhibition space is no longer solely responsible for display functions, but has become a field for resource allocation and discourse games, intuitively exposing the inherent shortcomings of the traditional art system.

Institutional Intervention-Based Parasitism can be mainly divided into three types of practical paths. In the critical parasitism of institutional fields, independent projects and niche creators rely on mainstream art institution platforms to hold exhibitions, share venues and academic resources, and examine deep-seated issues such as industry topic solidification and discourse monopoly from a creative perspective [6]. Palais de Tokyo in France adheres to the avant-garde and open concept, has long absorbed critical art

projects, provided exhibition channels for underrepresented creations, and dissolved the monotonous narrative pattern of mainstream art.

Shared public resource parasitism targets small and medium-sized art groups lacking exhibition halls and funding. Relying on urban cultural and tourism spaces, as well as existing venues in cultural and creative parks, to organize exhibitions and revitalize idle public resources in the city. The Beijing 798 Art District is transformed from old industrial buildings, gathering art practitioners with the advantage of space cost, relying on the supporting facilities of the park to form a native art ecology, and bridging the distance between contemporary art and the public.

The operational rules are permeated with parasitism, following the traditional exhibition framework and achieving breakthroughs in the selection of works, exhibition logic, and other aspects. The Hangzhou Fiber Art Triennial abandons fame and market orientation, focuses on supporting young and folk creators, and reflects on the industry's solidified evaluation system through differentiated curation.

Such parasitic practices break the monopoly of mainstream art institutions' discourse, broaden diverse art dissemination paths, and prompt the industry to face the imbalance of resource allocation. This practice still faces constraints, with insufficient tolerance from mainstream institutions, and folk art projects facing difficulties in terms of venue, funding, and academic recognition [7]. Balancing innovation and standardization is something that this type of curation needs to continuously explore. In addition to criticizing and breaking through institutional dimensions, parasitic ideas also form a symbiotic expression at the cultural level, forming the deep core of exhibition narrative.

5. Cultural Symbiosis-Based Parasitism: Cross-Contextual Narrative Construction and Cultural Meaning Generation in Exhibitions

Cultural Symbiosis-Based Parasitism is based on cultural context, and regards traditional context, regional customs, and cross-cultural artistic language as the parasitic mother body. Contemporary art exhibitions rely on borrowing, reconstruction, and dialogue to integrate and coexist with the original cultural system, enriching the narrative level of the exhibition and giving birth to new cultural connotations. This model does not deliberately create opposition or subversion, but rather relies on the mother culture to complete the translation of contemporary art, connecting tradition with modernity, local with global cultures.

Cultural Symbiosis-Based Parasitism has formed three typical paths in practice. The parasitic reconstruction of traditional cultural symbols draws creative foundations from classical forms, traditional crafts, and folk symbols, and integrates contemporary aesthetic perspectives and social thinking. Cai Guoqiang deeply cultivates traditional gunpowder craftsmanship and integrates folk skills into the contemporary art context through large-scale installations and on-site blasting art museum exhibitions [8]. It can not only preserve the spiritual core of traditional culture, but also endow it with modern temperament through spatial visual narrative, allowing traditional skills to be revitalized in contemporary exhibitions.

The mutual parasitism across art media breaks the creative boundaries of painting, sculpture, installation, imaging and

other categories, permeating and complementing each other in the same exhibition venue. Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's "Between Going and In" joint exhibition is arranged in a way that interweaves their works and echoes the theme, and the two creative languages naturally complement each other. Breaking away from the inherent mode of traditional exhibition zoning display, the entire exhibition hall forms a complete and smooth narrative thread [9].

The field parasitism of urban regional culture is rooted in the historical texture of the city and local life, relying on the local context to construct exhibition narratives. The Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) closely follows the regional characteristics and urban renewal status of the Pearl River Delta, integrating the exhibition into the context of urban development. The layout of exhibits and the expression of themes are in line with the local temperament, becoming an important carrier for preserving urban culture and conveying local thinking.

This parasitic form broadens the cultural boundaries of contemporary exhibitions, activates the intrinsic value of traditional and regional cultures, and makes spatial narratives more profound. Currently, many exhibitions have problems such as shallow application of cultural symbols and scattered themes in cross-media creation. Only by rooting in the cultural core can exhibitions combine narrative and cultural heritage, and provide support for upgrading the audience experience. The narrative reconstruction of space, system, and culture ultimately leads to the innovation of audience experience, and the parasitism concept completes the reshaping of the exhibition experience paradigm.

6. Reconstruction of Exhibition Experience under the Parasitism Concept: From Static Observation to Immersive On-Site Participation

The parasitism concept reshapes the spatial form and narrative logic of contemporary art exhibitions, and completely changes the public's viewing experience mode. Conventional art museums generally adopt the "white cube" display form, creating a closed exhibition environment with solid color walls and fixed lighting. The audience can only passively receive the information conveyed by the exhibition by observing from a distance, following a fixed route, and maintaining independent boundaries with the exhibits and space. Parasitic exhibitions break away from this inherent pattern and immerse the audience in spatial narrative, shaping the visitor's experience physically and intellectually.

The reconstruction of bodily perception is the first step in experiential transformation. This type of exhibition does not have a fixed viewing route or distance. The works are often placed in architectural crevices, public corners, and other areas, allowing the audience to freely wander and stop, and explore every corner of the space independently. Immersive installation exhibitions break through isolation, allowing audiences to directly enter the work field and complete artistic interpretation through their own senses, completely breaking the traditional static viewing mode [10].

Old buildings and abandoned factories in cities are often used as venues for parasitic exhibitions. This type of space retains traces of urban life and the texture of time, and can form a narrative resonance with artworks. Para Site Art Space in Hong Kong regularly selects old shops and industrial buildings, fully preserving the original architectural style of

the site. When the audience is immersed in it, it is easy to create emotional resonance with their life memories, and the gap between art and daily life is also dissolved [11].

The concept of parasitism inherently involves intervention and speculative attributes, and exhibition storytelling is not limited to visual aesthetics. Space revitalization, artistic mechanism operation, and regional cultural inheritance can all be topics for exhibition exploration. Viewers not only appreciate art forms, but also actively think about practical issues such as the utilization of idle urban space and the contemporary development of traditional culture. Exhibitions have thus become a public space for public cultural thinking.

The establishment of the audience's dominant position is the key to the transformation of the experience mode. Some exhibitions excessively pursue interactive forms, neglecting the expression of artistic core, and also have problems such as chaotic flow and lack of guidance. Balancing immersive experience with artistic connotation, balancing spatial layout freedom and exhibition order, is the only way to make parasitic exhibitions have more stable practical value.

7. Conclusion

This article takes the theoretical origin of the parasitism concept as the starting point, and combines empirical cases at home and abroad to systematically explain its reshaping mechanism on the narrative of exhibition space around the three-dimensional path of physical attachment, institutional intervention, and cultural symbiosis. At the same time, it clarifies the transformation logic of the audience's exhibition experience from three dimensions: bodily perception, emotional resonance, and cognitive speculation.

The concept of parasitism has long gone beyond its biological meaning and extended to philosophical speculation and contemporary curatorial practice, breaking the traditional white box model of art museums and opening up new creative ideas. The physical level of spatial parasitism has dissolved the boundary between the exhibition hall and the urban environment, revitalizing idle corner sites; The intervention and reflection at the institutional level have broken the discourse monopoly of the art circle and broadened the development channels for niche exhibitions; The symbiotic integration at the cultural level requires a deep exploration of local cultural context and artistic language, allowing traditional art to be revitalized in contemporary exhibitions. The three paths are interdependent, forming a complete narrative logic of parasitic curation.

In terms of exhibition experience, this mode breaks away from the fixed thinking of static viewing, allowing the audience to no longer be distant observers, but immerse themselves in spatial narrative, effectively bringing contemporary art closer to the general public, and also meeting the practical needs of urban space revitalization and diversified art popularization.

Objectively speaking, there are still many shortcomings in the practical implementation of the parasitism concept. Many exhibitions blindly pursue spatial form, and cultural symbols are applied superficially, trapped in formalism at the expense of artistic depth; The unstable operation of the venue, insufficient industry recognition, and insufficient visitor guidance and supporting facilities also urgently need to be improved. In the future, curation should adhere to the core concept of parasitism and abandon the formalism of blindly following trends. The academic community can also expand research perspectives and integrate this concept into urban public art and rural exhibition construction, help contemporary art connect with the public and carry richer culture.

References

- [1] Wineman, J. D., & Peponis, J. (2010). Constructing spatial meaning: Spatial affordances in museum design. *Environment and Behavior*, 42(1), 86-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916509335534>
- [2] Brown, S. D. (2002). Michel Serres: Science, translation and the logic of the parasite. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19(3), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276402019003001>
- [3] Thompson, N. (Ed.). (2012). *Living as form: Socially engaged art from 1991-2011*. MIT Press.
- [4] Beyes, T. (2010). Uncontained: The art and politics of reconfiguring urban space. *Culture and Organization*, 16(3), 229-246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2010.492283>
- [5] Németh, J., & Langhorst, J. (2014). Rethinking urban reformation: Temporary uses for vacant land. *Cities*, 40, 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.04.011>
- [6] Bishop, C. (2004). Antagonism and relational aesthetics. *October*, 110, 51-79. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810>
- [7] Alexander, V. D. (2018). Heteronomy in the arts field: State funding and British arts organizations. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69(1), 23-43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12260>
- [8] Jones, C. A. (2020). *The global work of art: World's fairs, biennials, and the aesthetics of experience*. University of Chicago Press.
- [9] O'Neill, P. (2007). The curatorial turn: From practice to discourse. In J. Rugg & M. Sedgwick (Eds.), *Issues in curating contemporary art and performance* (pp. 13-28). Intellect Books.
- [10] Pallasmaa, J. (2024). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119941253>
- [11] Brinck, I. (2018). Empathy, engagement, entrainment: The interaction dynamics of aesthetic experience. *Cognitive Processing*, 19(2), 201-213. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-017-0843-5>